



Servicemembers learn Marine combat skills

*Story and photos by U.S. Air Force
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KABUL, Afghanistan—For most people, being thrown around in the dirt after working at least a 12-hour shift in a combat zone doesn't sound like an ideal ending to their day.

However, for 14 Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen, it is exactly what they did for two weeks at Camp Eggers.

They were students in the Marine Corps Martial Arts tan belt course that teaches basic close-combat techniques. The class ran five days a week from 6 to 9 p.m. and was taught by Gunnery Sgt. Douglas Yagel, senior noncommissioned officer of the OMC-A's Air Plans section, with the help of former graduates of the class.

Yagel decided to teach the martial arts program here for a couple reasons. Since he is a trained and certified instructor, it is part of his job to teach martial arts. So it keeps his skills sharp. He has instructed more than 50 people since his arrival in Kabul.

"Once you are an instructor, at least for me, you feel the need to teach," Yagel said.

He also thought training a small group of people would allow the combat mentality to trickle down to others in the students' units.

The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program has a rich history and has evolved with the ever-changing styles and concepts of war-time combat. It incorporates specific



Students of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program tan belt course execute various take down techniques in the sand pit.

techniques from various established martial arts.

The program consists of a belt ranking system with five basic levels: tan, gray, green, brown and black belt. Black belts can attain one of six degrees of black belt skill.

Each student learned and was tested on techniques they could need in various situations. The techniques included how to restrain people who grab them from behind, how to get out of headlocks and choke holds, and how to stop a person from taking a weapon from them.

The tan belt class is made up of three parts that work together to "produce a warrior": physical, mental and character training.

"It can't be all physical training. You can teach anybody how to kill, but if they don't have the character side and the mental side, they won't use [the training] in the proper context," Yagel said. "It is about know-

ing when and where to use the techniques."

Yagel and the other instructors had to be creative when planning the physical conditioning because the space and training aids are limited here.

He said the altitude was a concern also, since Kabul is 5,900 feet above sea level.

The purpose of the mental training was to get the students thinking more about their surroundings and to be aware of and ready for anything.

He believes everyone here should be in a combat mindset; assessing the intent of everyone around you and always thinking like the enemy.

Yagel gave classes on what to look for when you were out in town and on the process and method of thinking through each situation. He taught them how to be aware of the



(Above) U.S. Army Maj. Michael Adame puts U.S. Army Maj. Sean Eyre in a choke hold during his qualification test in the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program tan belt course.

(Right) U.S. Army Capt. Thomas Ficarra uses a leg sweep to take down U.S. Army Lt. Col. Rick Noriega. The students were required to properly execute 47 techniques to receive their tan belt qualification.



possibility that something could go wrong.

Even though the class was not all Marines and the training environment was different, the course outline was not compromised.

The techniques taught are the same techniques Marines are taught in their boot camp, but he said it is a little different here.

“We are in a combat zone. It is easier to relate it to everyday, real-world situations. So the mentality is different,” Yagel said. “After the class, you could go out the gate to go home and be confronted with a situation that you just learned

about.”

The class was challenging for every student.

“I wanted to learn some basic

combat martial arts skills. But I really wanted to prove to myself, and others, that I could do it. I knew it was going to be physically tough and I did not want to quit once I started it,” U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Timothy Doty said. “I received valuable skills, and many bruises, out of the class.”

“It is all a state of mind,” U.S. Army Maj. Miguel Gonzalez said as

beads of sweat of dripped from his forehead. Gonzalez had just passed the test for his tan belt.

For some students, this was more than just a chance to learn martial arts techniques.


“As a staff officer you don’t get

the opportunity to break a sweat and get in the dirt with the Soldiers as often as you used to,” U.S. Army Lt. Col. Rick Noriega said. “I am 47 years old. I will never again have the opportunity to get this training—and it is free!”

Everyone who started the class graduated, which is above average. Yagel said the average is 10 graduates in a class of 12.

“I knew everyone would graduate,” Yagel said. “They proved themselves every time they came to the pit. The true test is making it through the day-to-day training and the combat conditioning drills.”

Yagel told his class the day before they tested for their belt, “This class will not teach you everything you need to know, but it will get you into the right frame of mind. It will build a warrior mentality.”

In the end, they all stepped up and earned their tan belts. 



Gunnery Sgt. Douglas Yagel explains the proper use of a martial arts technique to the students.